



**Interfaith  
Relations  
and the Church**

# THE MORAL CHALLENGE

**National Council of Churches U.S.A.**

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### Questions for Reflection:

1. What are our central ethical norms that can help us in our discernment and decision-making in the face of serious moral challenge?
2. Do you think Christians today ever assume that by being open and friendly with persons who follow other religions they might be required to deny their own faith? Is this fear justified?
3. Can you think of ways to be in relationship with or engage others that might contradict your deepest Christian convictions or involve possible moral pitfalls?
4. What constitutes a brief outline or checklist of what you consider appropriate versus inappropriate actions in interfaith relations?
5. In your view, what would constitute so great a religious difference that Christians should refuse to relate to persons of other faiths on the basis of morality? What effects do you think that maintaining such relationships might have?
6. What kind of relationship do you think we would want to develop with religious others if we're concerned for mutual wholeness and healing? What would be the qualities of such a relationship?

meanwhile, Christians bear witness to the reality of God's initiative through working for justice and righteousness with harmony and peace. For this challenging task, Jesus is our moral standard and norm.

Christian redemption and life in the Spirit of Christ help believers become conscious of our role in relation to others and liberates individuals to transformational service in society. In today's pluralistic society, that necessarily includes interacting as positively as possible with devout adherents of other religions in faithfulness to our own faith tradition.

Precisely because God *is* God and we have received God's promises, Christians can lovingly trust God ultimately to take care of conflicts sometimes brought on by significant differences. We can continue striving faithfully to serve Christ by working for mutual understanding and appreciation of practitioners of diverse faiths. In the final analysis, Christians trust God in hope that the outcome of all our efforts to love God and neighbor will bear the fruits of the Spirit.

### **Prayer**

God, we give you thanks for the many ways you offer us to serve you. Guide our moral discernment so that we may be instruments of your love, sharing your peace and healing with the world. Help us to respond with conviction and with grace when we are confronted with moral challenges. Save us from hypocrisy and uphold us in consistency. Give us discerning hearts and minds, so that we may be strong in working for justice and humble in confessing our own moral failures. Lead us again and again to your Holy Spirit. Comfort us with hope in your promises. We lift up our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. Amen.

## **Interfaith Relations and the Church: The Moral Challenge**

The increasing cultural and religious plurality in our country, coupled with recent world events—especially in the wake of 9/11—make it difficult for many Americans, including American Christians, to know just how to relate to people of other faiths. We are faced with moral questions at every turn. There are two spheres of moral questions that we are concerned with in this study. First, we consider how we apply a moral test to Christian witness and relationship building with people of other faiths. Second, we explore the moral lenses through which we assess the actions of all religious persons and religions, including our own.

Religious diversity and our work for positive relations must be subjected to a rigorous test, which sometimes may be a matter of life and death. We can be open to diversity only within moral parameters. For instance, we cannot support racism, xenophobia, or sexism in the name of “openness.” Religious beliefs and moral values are not simply a matter of personal preference. Nazism, white supremacist churches, or religiously-based terrorism are morally unacceptable. The thin line between what is acceptable and unacceptable is crossed when human beings claim that their faith is superior and as a consequence call for aggression against others.

We find ourselves confronted with many moral questions. For example, are certain forms of traditional Muslim practice regarding women to be accepted as religious diversity or denounced as violations of human rights? Similarly, do our Christian ethics require us to speak out publicly against the

stereotyping of Muslims as violent and intolerant? How far afield do our moral responsibilities extend? For example, is it our place to address the horrific violence confronting Hindus and Christians in Orissa or threatening Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims in Sri Lanka? What are our moral obligations as Christians? It is crucial for our nation's health and reputation, as well as for the wellness and character of the Church, that we consider the complexity inherent in the moral challenges of interfaith relations.

### **Ways of Responding to Religious Diversity: Jesus is Our Norm**

The Christian Scriptures provide warnings against reacting wrongly to religious others. Instructive examples include Abraham's prejudicial fear of the Canaanite king Abimelech (Gen 20:11) and Jesus' disciples' stereotyping of Samaritans (Jn 4:33). Regrettably, reactions today may be no more enlightened than in biblical times. Acting with indifference or mere toleration is also inadequate. Toleration may become a polite excuse for indifference or a lack of Christian love. Once again, there are biblical examples of this response—Jonah was indifferent to the plight of Nineveh (Jon 1:1-3) while God remained committed to their well-being.

How, then, should we Christians relate to persons who practice other religions? Jesus provides our biblical grounding for a more ethical way of approaching others. Here Jesus' demanding ethic of love applies practically (Luke 10:27). Jesus crossed multiple barriers that separated respectable religious folk of his day from the foreigners, the pagans, the disenfranchised, and the marginalized of his society. Jesus was forgiving, loving, and befriending. A moral challenge of interfaith relations is to treat persons of other faiths as Jesus did and would.

for example, can join together with morally-minded Muslims in renouncing the dangerous interpretations of religious faith by the Ku Klux Klan or al-Qaida. Reaching out to the marginalized and renouncing violence are core Christian principles. In light of those ideals we strive for what God wills for the world: harmony and unity for the good of humanity.

### **Dwelling in God's Grace and Love**

In all of our testing of the spirits and moral discernment, we must look for the log in our own eye before too quickly pointing out the speck in someone else's eye. We must remember that God is God and we are not. God is the all-seeing judge, and we are not. God is also our hope and our salvation. And so in all these matters, in the end we turn again to that Spirit of the Living God and trust in the promises we have been offered—the promise of the reign of God founded upon justice and peace.

As Christians we count on God's goodness, power, and wisdom on behalf of ourselves and others. Our experience of God in Christ, our encounter of Christ in the Spirit, our understanding of the Bible and our home in the history and tradition of the Christian Church—all these and more—encourage us, like Abraham, to expect our Creator and Sustainer (Sanctifier) God to do what is just and right for all the earth (Gen 18:25). Our moral compass is firmly rooted in the unchanging nature and character of our Redeemer God, Jesus, and not in ourselves.

The biblical letter of James advises us that "wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy" (3:17). Human beings have a difficult time consistently living rooted in such wisdom from above. Nor do we have the capacity to establish the ideal form of the Kingdom of God in history. That glorious goal awaits God's own action at the end of time. In the

believers, but those who have traditionally been treated as non-persons.

In interfaith relations, it is important to keep in mind that those who practice faiths other than the dominant religion may be made to feel like they don't count—that is, like they are not fully valued as human beings. Since Christians consistently affirm every human being as created in the image of God, the marginalization of whole segments of the human family therefore presents a serious moral challenge. We may not be able to change the religious identity of our non-Christian neighbors (nor may some even wish to do so), but we must commit ourselves afresh to treating them as persons worthy of our respect. Further, due to our own ethical understanding we ought always to encourage our partners from other traditions to join us in empowering and ennobling every human being everywhere so much as is possible.

Violence in religious guise is another moral issue that our generation cannot sidestep. Unfortunately religion is being (mis)used to foster, justify, and intensify violence. For example, we distinguish between the Amish and Jonestown communities through assessing the fruits of the Spirit, or outcomes that each community manifests. We seek to identify the presence of God and the presence of the demonic in our moral discernment. The effects of God's presence are not bloodshed and power manipulation. Whatever standards we set for assessing morality, we must be faithful to the standard even in assessing our own failures and intentions. Asserting moral norms against opponents and giving exemptions to our allies is not a true standard of moral discernment.

Any religion has violence in its heritage somewhere. Adherents of various religions can work together to condemn violence perpetrated in the name of religion. Morally-minded Christians,

## Applying the Moral Test to Christian Witness

How might Christians apply the test of morality to our efforts in witness and relationship-building with people of other faiths? We need to examine our motives for conversation or dialogue. Are we disrespectful or dishonest in our portrayals of other faiths or their founders? Are we honest in our portrayals of Christianity? Have we replaced enthusiasm and passion with imposition and coercion? Do we have as much interest in learning about how God is already present in the lives of others as we do in telling our own stories? Do we run the risk of entering into dialogue for the express purpose of proselytizing? Finding answers to these questions provides a rich experience in understanding the core of one's own convictions of faith.

Many have suggested that relational evangelism is the most effective kind of witnessing, and that dialogue builds relationships. Yet the witness of interfaith dialogue has a goal in mutual understanding, sharing, and enrichment. To turn dialogue into a technique whose ultimate goal is conversion is morally problematic for a Christian ethic. If, however, in the process of becoming dialogue partners a Christian and a person of another faith become friends and trust is established, sharing the gospel witness in the context of learning about each other's faith journeys becomes a natural response. It is important in such a case that dialoguers are equally ready to receive insights from persons of other faiths who are their conversation partners.

Additionally, Christians who focus on dialogue as a major part of their witness must address the concern that other Christians may have that they are forfeiting their faith in order to be "friends" with others. When engaged in dialogue, we should ask ourselves if we are staying grounded in our faith even while developing open-hearted relationships with those of other religions. A desire for others to convert to Christ is a natural and

normal expression of Christian compassion but the decision to convert or the action of conversion must always be left in the hands of God and with the hearts of our hearers. Moral evangelistic witness is always freely offered but never forced (Rev 22:17).

### **Assessing Moral Parameters of Religious Practice: Testing the Spirits**

Our desire to identify and live out a Christ-centered morality requires that we apply consistent means of discernment, rooted in our faith, the biblical witness, and the norm that Jesus provides for us. Acting in the way of Jesus—befriending, forgiving, and loving those who may be strangers to us—does not require us to give up our moral, spiritual, or theological commitments. On the contrary, our interfaith relations (and all relationships, for that matter) will be stronger if they are rooted in these commitments.

The biblical witness suggests that we test the spirits to see whether they are from God. Because we hold a Trinitarian faith, Christians believe that wherever God is, the Holy Spirit and Christ are also. Some theologies suggest that the Holy Spirit is present everywhere and influences all creation, including the world's religions. Such a theology of the Spirit is sensitive to the reality of many "spirits" in the world and in the world's religions. This requires Christian discernment. Criteria for discerning the Holy Spirit as distinct from other spirits includes looking for the fruits of the Spirit, ethical conduct, and signs of the coming kingdom or reign of God. Galatians 5:22-23a teaches that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." As Romans 14:17 explains, God's reign expresses itself in "righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." Where these fruits are evident, we may feel confident that the mysterious presence of the Holy

Spirit of God the Creator and Christ the Redeemer is also to be found.

Similarly, the Gospel of Matthew suggests that "every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit" (7:17). Suppose we test the spirits and discern that we are in the presence of "bad fruit"—for we do not see love, joy, or peace. Rather, we see domination, violence, and manipulation. How are we called to respond? Jesus' teaching is for us to love friends, strangers and enemies alike. How is this possible? We are challenged to defend justice while manifesting the fruits of the Spirit. We are called to affirm and embody our moral commitments. Love inspires us to pursue justice by means of exhibiting love, joy, peace, patience and other fruits of the Spirit.

We discern the Holy Spirit's presence and activity to the best of our ability at this time. As time passes, we may realize that we have misjudged. Our own limitations require that we re-assess our theological and moral convictions to see if we have missed the mark. We hold our Christian convictions in balance with a willingness to perceive the presence of the Holy Spirit in others.

### **Moral Challenges Regarding Marginalization and Violence**

Christians establishing and developing appropriate relations with partners who are religiously different from ourselves encounter a web of interrelated concerns requiring keen moral consideration. For example, marginalized peoples are an unfortunate reality of the present world system that must be addressed energetically. Traditional theology has largely originated in the Christian academy or other centers of religious power. However, a distinctive mark of the ministry of our Lord was a dramatic concern for the disenfranchised (Mk 2:16). Christian theologians from outside traditional power centers have reminded us to consider not only those who are non-